

House to vote on bill preventing welfare waivers

By STEPHEN OHLEMACHER | Associated Press – 3 hrs ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House is taking up a politically charged bill that would block the [Obama administration](#) from waiving any work requirements in the [1996 welfare reform law](#).

[House Republicans](#) are using the bill to renew a political fight that started during the presidential campaign. They say President [Barack Obama](#) is trying to gut work requirements in the law — a claim that is disputed by administration officials.

The House is scheduled to vote on the bill Wednesday, though it has little chance in the Democratic-controlled Senate. The House passed a similar bill last year that died in the Senate.

Last summer, the Obama administration announced it would be willing to grant states waivers of some of the law's requirements but only if governors can show they can accomplish the same welfare-to-work goals using different methods.

No state applied for a waiver. [The White House](#) said they were "deterred in part by inaccurate claims about what the policy involves."

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney seized on the issue during the campaign, accusing Obama of gutting [welfare reform](#). The issue became the subject of many campaign ads.

"The only reason you'd need a waiver would be to lessen the work requirement," said Rep. Dave Camp, R-Mich., chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee. "The states are free to strengthen them, now."

Democrats claim that Republicans are distorting the goal of the waivers. The administration said the waiver program was a response to concerns from state officials that the law's work requirements created bureaucratic hurdles to placing welfare recipients in jobs.

"Flexibility was requested by governors on both sides of the aisle to allow states to test new, more effective ways to place more people on a path to self-sufficiency," the White House said in a statement Tuesday. "The administration is disappointed that the bill includes this unnecessary bar to innovative welfare-to-work strategies."

The 1996 welfare act created the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, provided states with block grants to carry out welfare reform, limited how long families may receive cash benefits and required that 50 percent of families receiving benefits be participating in work activities.

Welfare caseloads declined after the law was enacted. In 2012, an average of 4 million people received benefits each month.

In a July letter to congressional leaders, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said that to qualify for a waiver, governors must show how they will move at least 20 percent more people from welfare to work. States must also show clear progress toward that goal within a year.

Republicans contend that the Health and Human Services Department was acting illegally in offering the waivers, saying the welfare law bars the administration from waiving the work requirement.

"The issue is the precedent," Camp said. "It would weaken an integral part of the welfare reform bill. If you're getting federal benefits and your able-bodied you need to work."

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